

November 1978

## The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Socialist Union in Opposition: From Elitism to Pluralism

Jack D. Dowell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dowell, Jack D. (1978) "The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Socialist Union in Opposition: From Elitism to Pluralism," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 6 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol6/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [commons@coastal.edu](mailto:commons@coastal.edu).

## The Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union in Opposition: From Elitism to Pluralism

JACK D. DOWELL

*Washington State University*

One of the most significant political developments in the West German Federal Republic has been the emergence of a near-majority party, the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU). After World War II Catholic trade union leaders joined moderate and conservative political leaders in creating what was for Germany a new kind of political organization, a synergetic "people's party." To an unprecedented degree the new party surmounted the economic, social and denominational sectarianism which had produced the ineffective multiparty systems of Bismarck's Reich and the Weimar Republic. After the first national election in 1949, CDU/CSU-dominated cabinets led the Federal Republic to economic prosperity and a prestigious position within the Atlantic community. As a result, the party enjoyed spectacular gains at the polls as farmers and the urban middle class gradually abandoned the smaller parties farther to the right on the political spectrum.

However, in recent years the party's voter appeal has suffered as it has groped for solutions to West Germany's new domestic and international problems. After having to accept West Germany's second major party, the Social Democrats, as partners in a Grand Coalition (1966-1969), the Christian Democrats were finally forced from national office as a result of the General Election of 1969. For the first time in the Republic's twenty year history, the Social Democrats formed a Government, although they needed a coalition with the one remaining minor party, the Free Democrats, to secure a parliamentary majority. And of course that Government, now led by Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, remains in power today, after being returned to office in 1972 and 1976.

The CDU/CSU's problems are complicated by its unusual formal structure. It is in fact two parties, except in the *Bundestag*, the lower house of the national legislature. The Christian Democratic Union, the focal point of this paper, is *almost* a nation-wide party, with the customary national organs plus regional and local units in every state but Bavaria. There, however, it is the CSU which is the dominant party,

maintaining its own organization, with its own party congress and chairman. Only in the *Bundestag* do deputies of both parties form a united caucus, with a single chairman and executive committee. And even there the CSU deputies function as a disciplined bloc, in effect as a "caucus" within a caucus.

Like all political parties which have lost national elections, the CDU/CSU has engaged in self-examination, even self flagellation, during the five and one-half years it has been in opposition. Numerous individuals and groups within the organization have agonized over its leadership problems, its diminished appeal to the electorate, and the power relationships among its various organs—the separate party congresses and chairmen, and the joint parliamentary caucus with its chairman.

As we analyze the structure of power within the CDU we can utilize the familiar concepts of elitism and pluralism. As we know, elitists hold that decision-making will inevitably be concentrated in the hands of a leader or small group of leaders, while pluralists argue that decisions are the product of compromises and bargains struck by numerous and competing groups.

Currently, both schools of thought have energetic and articulate supporters among Christian Democrats. The argument is familiar, focusing as it does upon the distribution of power between the extra-parliamentary organization and those of its leaders who hold public office. On the one hand, some defend an avowedly elitist position: the party should remain a loosely organized, decentralized electoral machine, without a direct role in decision-making. The extra-parliamentary organization should support unhesitatingly its leaders in the legislative and executive branches, and permit them wide flexibility on policy issues.

On the other hand, there are those in the party, popularly termed the "reformers," who argue that if the party is to survive these bitter years in opposition, it must build a more tightly knit organizational structure at all levels. Salaried employees should replace regional and local party notables. Active party units should be organized in the smallest and most remote communities of the Federal Republic. The central organs of the extra-parliamentary party should be strengthened and given sufficient authority to hold the party together in these times of adversity. And, most important, when the CDU/CSU regains national office, the party organization should play an active role in policy-making, even *vis-a-vis* its own chancellor and parliamentary caucus.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For an extended discussion of the "reformist" position, still applicable to the party's problems, see Anton Böhm, "Doch Keine Testwahl," *Die Politische Meinung* 9 Jahrgang (Mai, 1964), 6-9.



From 1949 until 1963, while Konrad Adenauer was both leader of the party and Chancellor of the Federal Republic, most commentators agreed that the party's internal distribution of power was decidedly elitist.<sup>2</sup> His authority was sufficient to maintain him at the pinnacle of the Government and to hold together the rival factions and leaders within his own party. Both the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary organs of the party were united in their desire to remain in public office and in their knowledge that Adenauer's electoral appeal guaranteed that felicitous status quo. The Chancellor could rely upon the CDU/CSU parliamentary deputies for complete support, especially on questions of foreign policy and defense. And, because attention was focused upon the dramatic quarrels between the Government and its opposition over such issues as NATO, rearmament and reunification, the public tended to denigrate both the parliamentary caucus and the party organization as spineless organs, dominated by the Chancellor and playing almost no significant role in the decision-making process.

Of course, even during the period of Adenauer's greatest ascendancy over the party, the influence of the parliamentary caucus, particularly on domestic issues, was more extensive than was generally recognized. Neither the extra-parliamentary organization nor the legislative caucus followed his wishes blindly, without doubts, without opposition. Here the Chancellor had to tread a cautious path among the competing groups and interests represented in both party and caucus. CDU/CSU parliamentarians, speaking for such disparate groups as industrial workers, farmers, middle classes, and industrialists, sometimes refused to support cabinet bills; if they could not compel the cabinet to withdraw an objectionable proposal, they were more often successful in securing important amendments desired by the interest groups they represented.<sup>3</sup>

However, the interest groups supporting the party, and their spokesmen within the caucus, agreed that the overriding importance of staying in power required coherent leadership, effective policies, even some sacrifices. And they usually recognized Adenauer's right to determine the final shape of public policy. To the extent, then, that the CDU/CSU caucus and parties accepted Adenauer's role as ultimate decision maker, we may fairly describe the distribution of power during those years as approaching the elitist model.

But the CDU has had leadership problems since Adenauer gave up both his governmental and party offices. Neither Ludwig Erhard nor

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Rüdiger Altmann, *Das Erbe Adenauers* (Stuttgart: Seewald Verlag, 1960), pp. 25-60.

<sup>3</sup> The preceding analysis owes much to the detailed work of Jürgen Domes, *Mehrheitsfraktion und Bundesregierung* (Köln, Westdeutscher Verlag, 1964), *passim*.

Kurt Georg Kiesinger, who followed Adenauer as party chairmen and Heads of Government, were strong leaders. Neither could successfully overcome the party's internal conflicts or enunciate persuasive new policies. And the squabbling among rival leaders and groups, and the controversies over the distribution of power within the organization, have redoubled since the party entered into opposition in 1969.

Kiesinger, who led the Grand Coalition, always understood his position to be Chancellor of the Federal Republic and, by virtue of that fact, Chairman of the CDU as well. Like Adenauer and Erhard before him, Kiesinger wanted the party chairmanship primarily to protect himself. He was concerned lest the power that he had won elsewhere, that is, in the caucus and in the government, should be open to challenge at party headquarters.<sup>4</sup> When he failed to win a return ticket to the Chancellorship in the autumn of 1969 he had to all intents and purposes also lost the leadership of the CDU. True, the party observed the amenities; the ex-chancellor was permitted to remain as party chairman for decent interval. But he quickly learned that that office alone does not have the authority or integrative power that it has when combined with the Chancellorship.<sup>5</sup>

Most important, Kiesinger was unable to capture the chairmanship of the joint CDU/CSU parliamentary caucus. Rainer Barzel, who had led the party's legislative forces during the years of the Grand Coalition, adjusted rapidly to the role of opposition leader in the *Bundestag* and successfully defended his claim to that position. Once firmly entrenched as leader of the CDU/CSU's only remaining national body, the joint caucus, he organized a powerful parliamentary apparatus and insisted upon strong voting discipline. He distributed important leadership posts within the caucus widely among his chief rivals, both to gain their loyalty and to contain their ambitions. Important decisions were made in the caucus by an inner group of parliamentarians called the Council of Eleven, dominated by Barzel.<sup>6</sup>

As Barzel gained strength and Kiesinger lost ground, so too did the power of the caucus increase compared to that of the extra-parliamentary party, despite determined efforts to expand the latter's role. An organizational expert was hired to plan new personnel policies and operational procedures, a central membership card index was finally begun,

<sup>4</sup> *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, June 9, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Werner Kaltfleiter, "Zwischen Konsens und Krise," *Verfassung und Verfassungswirklichkeit*, Jahrbuch 1973, Teil I, 38.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Pridham, "The CDU/CSU Opposition in West Germany, 1969-1972: A Party in Search of an Organization," *Parliamentary Affairs*, Vol. XXVI, No. 2 (Spring, 1973), 209.



a recruitment drive temporarily tripled the number of dues paying members, and a new party headquarters building was constructed in Bonn.<sup>7</sup> But any fundamental reform might have threatened the delicate balance of interests within the party and thereby endanger its unity. In addition, regional party notables were reluctant to grant increased power to the national headquarters. In fact, the entire extra-parliamentary organization remained disorganized and demoralized by repeated electoral reverses.

As Kiesinger's political power declined, Barzel's new intra-party rival emerged in the person of Helmut Kohl, Minister-President in the state of Rheinland-Pfalz, who, although not a member of the *Bundestag*, hoped to assume the party chairmanship as a stepping stone to the greatest prize of all, the nomination for the chancellorship. He appealed to the party "reformers" and to the fears of many party members that Barzel might return to the Adenauer pattern. As a means of overcoming Barzel's power base in the caucus, Kohl, voicing the pluralist position, argued for a greater role for the extra-parliamentary party, utilizing the familiar arguments of greater democracy, more participation, overthrowing the old oligarchy, *etc. etc.* He demanded that the party and caucus chairmanships be separated, to avoid the concentration of power in a single individual holding both offices.<sup>8</sup> He also demanded that the party's chancellor candidate be named by the party congress, rather than by the legislative caucus. It was the task of the extra-parliamentary organization, he argued, to mold the party's general political goals; the parliamentary deputies should be charged with executing the party's broad programmatic commitment.<sup>9</sup> This, of course, is an argument that plagues most European parties of the democratic left, but is rather foreign to the theory and practice of parties of the center and right.

But in 1971, delegates to the CDU's annual congress responded instead to the need for clear, unified leadership, and elected Barzel to replace Kiesinger as party chairman. (Not incidentally, many of the delegates to the Congress were also members of the parliamentary caucus.) With another General Election drawing near, the Congress accepted Barzel's argument that during campaigns all individuals and offices within a democratic party organization must be subordinated to the needs of the candidate, who must in turn speak for the party in the only available national forum, the legislative chambers. Barzel now led both the CDU and the joint caucus.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>8</sup> The pros and cons of separating the two leadership positions are discussed at length in Kaltefleiter, pp. 40-45.

<sup>9</sup> *Der Spiegel*, January 22, 1973.

One more step remained, however, before Barzel, as the acknowledged spokesman for both the CDU and the CSU, could challenge the Government of the then-Chancellor Willy Brandt. It is conceivable that the party congresses of the CDU and the CSU, meeting separately or jointly could agree upon a single candidate for the chancellorship. In practice, however, the matter has been settled in the joint caucus, where the CSU (which presently means Franz Josef Strauss) can play the role of kingmaker, demanding substantial concessions in return for its endorsement of a common candidate. And, true to form, Strauss did delay final caucus approval of Barzel's nomination for some weeks. Strauss demanded lengthy negotiations, unprecedented in the history of the CDU/CSU, during which an *ad hoc* joint commission would draw up a program, construct a shadow cabinet, and finally name a chancellor candidate. Only in November, 1971, after considerable damage to Barzel's public position, did Strauss bow to the inevitable and agree to accept the CDU leader as the Chancellor designate of the CDU/CSU . . . but a candidate clearly at the mercy of Strauss and the conservative forces in the caucus.

But Barzel's difficulties with Strauss were still unresolved. In May of 1972, only a few months before the General Election, the Chancellor nominee was compelled to bow to pressure from Strauss and the party's right wing on the issue of *Ostpolitik*. He had to abandon his earlier recommendation that the caucus vote "yes" on a treaty with the German Democratic Republic, and to agree that the caucus members should simply abstain from voting. Even the pro-CDU newspapers in the Federal Republic commented editorially that the CDU/CSU's course appeared to be set in Bavaria, Strauss' stronghold, rather than in the Federal capitol.

Unfortunately for Barzel's ambitions, he was unable to lead the CDU/CSU to victory in the 1972 election. And, like Kiesinger before him, his failure to gain the chancellorship meant loss of his party leadership positions. His rivals, especially Strauss, immediately blamed him for the defeat at the polls. Apparently there was some justification for this; public opinion polls taken before the election revealed that even CDU/CSU supporters rated Brandt over Barzel by a substantial margin. After the election the CDU's own election analysts estimated that Barzel cost the party 4% of its potential votes.<sup>10</sup>

For a short time it appeared that the conflict over personalities and policies might even result in the break-up of the joint caucus, although that was avoided when the moderates in both the CDU and CSU pre-

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



vailed.<sup>11</sup> In January, 1973 Kohl formally declared himself a candidate for the party chairmanship and renewed his argument that the chairmanships of the party and of the caucus should not be held by a single person. In May, 1973 Barzel chose to resign as caucus chairman when his fellow deputies in effect declared their lack of confidence in him by rejecting his recommendation that they vote in favor of German membership in the United Nations.<sup>12</sup> Soon after, he gave up the party chairmanship as well.

This time, Kohl got his wish. It was, in a sense, a repetition of events after the 1969 defeat. Karl Carstens replaced Barzel as leader of the caucus and Kohl was elected party chairman by the CDU congress in 1973. The duality of 1969-71, when Barzel led the caucus and Kiesinger the party, was reconstructed. Immediately the old rivalry reappeared, and remains unresolved today. Neither Carstens nor Kohl regards himself as an interim incumbent. Both appeared to have serious hopes of leading the CDU/CSU in the next national campaign.

As in Barzel's case, the role of parliamentary leader offers Carstens many chances to demonstrate his leadership qualities. Although he has not been conspicuously successful in exploiting these opportunities, the majority of the caucus appears determined to support him, since attacks upon Carstens weaken the caucus in its struggle to retain its autonomy *vis-a-vis* the party headquarters.<sup>13</sup>

For Kohl, leadership of the party finally offers a national role and platform from which to campaign for the nomination. He has reduced the authority and influence of Carstens over the staff of experts working for the caucus and party. And he has also insisted that the party should proceed with its proper task of setting long-term goals. In practice, this has proved difficult; specific policy commitments are almost certain to threaten one or more of the important interest groups nominally supporting the party. Similarly, Kohl's demand that the party participate actively in the legislative work of the caucus has met vigorous resistance.

And, once again, it is Strauss of the CSU who is playing upon the divisions within the CDU. He offers assistance first to one CDU leader, then another, but does not hesitate to denigrate his rivals publicly. His is a strategy of delay; throughout 1974 he resisted Kohl's efforts to be named the chancellor candidate of both parties. And the strategy may

<sup>11</sup> *Frankfurter Rundschau*, December 6, 1972.

<sup>12</sup> The majority of the caucus voted no because the bill implied approval of the entry of both the German Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic into the UN. *New York Times*, May 10, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> *Der Spiegel*, February 10, 1975.



work: Strauss led the CSU to a huge victory in last fall's Bavarian state election, thus strengthening his claim for serious consideration as a chancellor candidate.<sup>14</sup> Kohl's failure to win a comparable margin of victory in his own state election in Rheinland-Pfalz on March 9, 1975, made it difficult for the CDU to deny Strauss the opportunity to challenge Schmidt the next year.<sup>15</sup>

Strauss projects the image of the strong man who can deal with the approaching social and economic crisis—unemployment, the energy problem and inflation. He decries the lack of law and order, the power of the trade unions, and the alleged weakness of the Government in the face of the persistent "Red Menace." He appeals to the inner-most fears of the citizens of a prosperous but vulnerable country. The greater portion of the CSU's gains last fall were among the upwardly mobile but politically unstable urban middle classes.<sup>16</sup>

The CDU/CSU confronts a very difficult task as long as it remains a dual party. But the simple surgical procedure of cutting the CDU/CSU caucus into its components would produce even worse consequences. If the joint caucus collapses, the CDU will have to organize in Bavaria and the CSU in turn will attempt to establish itself as a fourth nationwide party. The more moderate leaders in both camps recognize the dangers: a reform-minded CDU would be competing with a national-conservative CSU throughout the Federal Republic. Any hope that the CDU might have of gaining an absolute majority in a national election would vanish; for its part, the CSU, realistically, could hope for little more than to establish itself as a right-wing minority party. Quite possibly, a split between the CDU and CSU could begin the process of replacing West Germany's aggregative 2½ parties with a splintered multi-party system.

Little more than a year away from another General Election, the CDU/CSU was still without a candidate for Chancellor. More than five years after leaving national office no acceptable arrangement has evolved to provide coherent and stable leadership. No lasting resolution of the basic problem of who speaks for the opposition has been achieved. Effective power is divided between the caucus on the one hand, and the two extra-parliamentary parties on the other; and the boundaries between these bodies are poorly defined. For a major party, or parties if they decide to go their separate ways, functioning within the institu-

<sup>14</sup> The CSU won an unprecedented 62.1% of the popular vote in the Bavarian state election, October 27, 1974. *The German Tribune*, February 13, 1975.

<sup>15</sup> Kohl and the CDU mustered 53% of the vote in Rheinland-Pfalz, which was less than his supporters had projected. *New York Times*, March 10, 1975.

<sup>16</sup> *Der Spiegel*, November 4, 1974.

tional arrangements of a parliamentary system, surely this degree of fragmentation, of incoherence, of decentralization are demonstrations of weakness, not strength, of immobility, not firmness. Most definitely, the present pattern of decision-making is *not* elitist; pluralistic elites and groups threaten the precarious unity which the CDU/CSU's role as the opposition demands.

In fact, the CDU appears to have become almost schizophrenic on the subject of leadership. On the one hand, it is fearful of falling once again under the control of a powerful personality. In that sense, the ghost of Adenauer still haunts the party. Apparently the CDU will not accept dynamic leadership except under desperate circumstances. On the other hand, effective leadership is almost certainly a key variable in its pursuit of power. The personalization of politics in moder democracies demands the strong leader, and this in turn means that the position of caucus and party chairmen should be combined with that of the chancellor candidate. This does not imply a "personality cult"; it is quite simply a political necessity. In a parliamentary system it is the leader of the legislative opposition who must present the image of Chancellor-to-be. It is he who presents to the voting public an alternative program during important debates and confrontations with the Government. It is he who must create majorities and reconcile conflicts among his fellow parliamentarians. And, not least important, if this role of the opposition leader is to be an effective one, the CDU must resolve its ambiguous attitude toward its own leadership if it is to defend itself from repeated encroachments by the CSU's Strauss. Paradoxically, the CDU/CSU must provide strong leadership within a system of democratic institutions and norms; if it cannot, the public will look for such leadership elsewhere.